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From Ivory to Babel to A New Foundation

Richard Boris¹

During my 12 years at the National Center for Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, I observed with increasing frustration the inability of administration and faculty leaders—union and governance—to fully grasp, analyze, and find pathways out of public higher education’s current *existential* crisis. Before becoming director at the National Center, I was local union chapter head at York College and then First Vice President at the central CUNY union. At that time, there were local issues such as grievances and, in my case, profound disagreements with a new college president: central issues such as Open Admissions and its aftermath in a politically sophisticated counterattack on this policy. There were also perennial issues such as protracted contract negotiations that were significant and arduous. All these “issues” were “normal” in the sense that the conflicts did not engender external political responses that questioned New York City’s system of public colleges, community colleges, or the graduate and professional schools. Conversations in my role as National Center executive director with national and local administration and union leaders about pre-crisis challenges told similar stories about hard bargaining, flare-ups, and difficult controversies within a general context of growth in resources and student numbers.

Existential Crisis

Often forgotten is the fact that during the 1960s when the first union organizing efforts began, higher education was at the center of national conversations about strategic reactions to perceived Soviet preeminence in science, technology, and more. A national consensus coalesced around the concept that our universities were among the best incubators in which to develop a strategic counteroffensive. Thus the 1960s were a time of massive public investment in higher education with post-Sputnik resource infusions, NASA grants, and National Defense Education Act awards to institutions and individuals. This cultural and political consensus resonated with prior historical practice of investment in public higher education: witness the land grant universities charged by the Morrill Acts (1862, 1890) with rural development, the G.I. Bills (1944, 1954), and the long history of state-funded public universities. Consequently the first

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union contracts were substantial; they significantly improved salaries and conditions of employment for faculty and staff (CUNY salaries after the first contract, for example, were among highest in the nation).

But since the 1990s, public higher education has been fed a starvation diet despite increased student demand and continued national and local need for scientific, cultural, and civic innovation; multi-national competition is now more challenging than anything the Soviet Union alone could muster, and our national and local economies require a well-educated workforce. Each year campus, union, and system leaders have testified in state capitols to lobby elected representatives and local office holders. These political rituals with their compelling testimonies about how opportunity and mobility pay off in state and local economic growth received minimal response from legislative representatives. This *new normal* now imposes draconian internal savings to bridge yearly, ever-increasing budget shortfalls that make the search for external funding the critical missionary work of college presidents. Full-time faculty salaries have stagnated, not meeting either cost of living indices or wages in competing sectors such as the digital economy.

Today's weakened public universities and colleges are object lessons showing how a two-decade devaluation has affected all that is "public." Most of our leaders—administrators, faculty governance, and union activists—have adjusted to slim resources and diminished influence in national and local political and public arenas. Few leaders have publically countered with a coherent alternative vision. Those who do speak out—and who are gaining the most attention and political traction because they are offering seductive fixes for resource-short institutions—are increasingly advocating that public systems be dismembered to favor independence and survival of only their strongest units: "university systems are inimical to the health of public flagship universities and to the states and regions they serve." (Berndahl, Sample & Rall, 2014). Disaggregation advocacy—the first step towards full privatization—is not restricted to flagship public institutions; trustees, presidents, and local legislators of *second-tier* public universities, often situated in prosperous suburbs, echo this call but with a slightly different twist: "The money to our schools has dropped so much, I might as well become a state-related," said [State Senator] Tomlinson, a 1970 graduate of West Chester University who serves on its board of trustees. "I'm willing to take less state money for more flexibility in running my own institution." (Snyder, 2014)

A recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article (Hebel, 2014) correctly maintains that we are at a tipping point because what was "once embraced as a collective good, a public higher education is increasingly viewed—and paid for—as a private one."

Many public universities and colleges are now public in name only (“25 years of declining state support,” 2014). Whatever the euphemism (in Pennsylvania it is *state-related*), the slow but persistent dismantling of once-proud state systems constitutes an expropriation of public wealth on the way to a profoundly tiered system that relegates the majority of public universities, colleges, and community colleges to the role of mass, resource-short *containers* of working-class, rural, and minority students (think: public housing).

Union, governance, and administrative leaders must share blame with legislators and the voting public for this state of affairs. Academic leaders have by and large failed to propose wily strategies or to launch grassroots movements that can challenge and alter the course (and discourse) of national and state public policy. What we have not done—and which other successful groups have—is to create a convincing narrative about an essential role for public universities in our nation. It is telling that with *inequality* now beginning to dominate public discourse there have been few attempts by our leaders to initiate or join these conversations.

With graduation rates that are shameful, with a teaching cohort that has been de-professionalized by short-sighted employment practices, and with too many students entering the workforce ill-prepared for the competitive market place in an economy of scarcity, public academic institutions to some extent have become sitting ducks for critics. Can it be surprising that major foundations such as *Lumina* and *Complete College America* have highlighted weak outcomes with convincing data? We have become easy targets. And most of us don’t know why.

Cheap Labor

The cheap labor policy is epigrammatic of academe’s and academic labor’s disarray. Frequent proclamations of academic virtue and freedom as well as multiple critiques on behalf the oppressed are undercut by academe’s tolerance and acceptance of a caste of academic vagabonds who work in precarious circumstances that almost always harm students. Overlooked and often unsaid is the stark fact that in a time of general scarcity the benefits, entitlements, and stability that the administrators and the full-time faculty enjoy (the two “favored” castes) are secured through surpluses generated by part-time (contingent) colleagues. They now constitute almost 50 percent—and in some institutions, mostly community colleges, much more—of the total faculty cohort.

What union leader or administrator had the courage twenty years ago (or yesterday) to warn against the casualization of academic labor, the adoption of a Walmart-inspired labor policy unworthy of institutions claiming intellectual integrity and academic honor? Too many

early conversations among union leaders focused on how to protect existing internal professional and political relationships from adjuncts rather than on protecting a full-time academic workforce as critical to their institutions' missions. Those who now organize contingent group—often non-traditional union players² who have moved into the breach left by the traditional unions—rarely reach beyond short-term amelioration of the current labor system to advocate for a new strategy that would restore full-time academic work to its historical levels of 75 or 80 percent. Administrators who ought to have lent their voices to this kind of advocacy instead still proffer the short-term perspective of their institutions' annual bottom lines: adjuncts save money. Faculty governance leaders still struggle over fair representation but rarely migrate into the dangerous terrain of advocacy for a restored academic workforce because they are unwilling to promote affirmative actions for contingent colleagues, which many say would weaken faculty prerogatives even though that would be the just course to take. A restored full-time academic workforce would be a major step to resolving many of the academic and outcome issues that now plague us.

The Chickens Come Home to Roost

Campus responses to restricted resources are remarkably uniform nationwide: on-the-cheap academic instruction paired with ever-increasing tuition (and deferring of both maintenance and procurement of new technology). Tuition revenues today exceed public monies in over half of our states (Hebel, 2014).³ Increased tuition is decreasing most public universities, colleges, and community colleges' historic role as mobility conduits for working-class and rural youth and minorities. The recent Supreme Court-ordered rejection of affirmative action has further constricted access at the same time that after-graduation debt burdens have raised the higher education access bar too high for many resource-short students. And those left behind are increasingly being recruited by proprietary institutions that promise—but more often than not don't deliver--significant financial assistance and guaranteed work after graduation.

Increasingly, public higher education institutions are becoming middle class bastions because elite private college costs are soaring and because the best working class and minority students are granted aid packages that the publics cannot match (Mettler, 2014).

² The Teamsters, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, United Steelworkers, and the Service Employees International Union are the most active non-traditional unions.

³ "Students are about to pay a larger share of the costs of a public education than that of states. In almost half of states, they already do. That's a significant change from even a decade ago, when students picked up about one-third of the tab and states paid the rest. Public colleges' growing reliance on tuition means that student debt, which has already topped \$1-trillion, is poised only to rise."

In those public community colleges, community colleges, and universities students confront qualitatively altered classroom experiences from what existed several decades earlier when most faculty were full time.

State and national political leaders who have reduced spending on public institutions of higher education are reaping a harvest of disgruntled middle class families that no longer champion public higher education because their children are now paying more to get less. Less of what? There are often fewer courses and slimmed offerings with larger sections taught by contingent faculty who must vanish after class because they often must teach at multiple campuses and institutions. The intense academic interactions of yesterday often are replaced by anomic, bloated in-class experiences where (to cite one example) language arts acquisition—universally acknowledged as the keystone for academic and workplace success—is not easily achieved. Largely gone is the glue that once bound students to their colleges and universities: an intimate classroom; after-class, informal office, corridor, cafeteria conversations; mentoring encounters that undergraduates never forget. Voter support for our public institutions of higher education would be stronger were our graduation rates higher, were our graduates more literate; were they armed with stronger analytic and workplace skills. But by not developing a logical, concise public narrative that fewer resources inevitably result in a dysfunctional instructional model for our students (as well for the casual workers imprisoned in this system), we have allowed control of the narrative to remain in the hands of those who would shrink or expropriate and privatize our public systems. The voting public does not understand that we get what we pay for because they don't understand—and we haven't helped them understand—that galloping tuition will never backfill the two-decade decline in public monies.

What Have I Learned? Leadership and Culture Count

My many years of observing leaders—presidents, provosts, local and national union heads—of public higher education during my tenure at the National Center and as a union leader before that lead me to the inescapable conclusion that together the leaders share a culture that shorts strategic planning, thinking, and boldness and instead favors ad-hoc, incremental acceptance of the ever-changing, slimmed-down state of affairs. The rarified bubbles of presidential cabinets and union boards symbiotically promote policies that, even when mutually hostile, mostly address short-term local matters and crises while rarely improving the educational experience, literacy, and graduation rates, which are, of course, the primary reason for academe's existence. Managers and most national union leaders too long removed from the classroom—if they ever were there in the first place—are often oblivious to the real world effects their policies

have on students and faculty. New policies (often with a clever slogan *du jour* that grabs management attention after being trumpeted by a national organization) rarely change outcomes.

Academic leaders on the union and administrative sides are further burdened by calendars that hardly ever permit reflection because of a never-ending succession of time consuming internal meetings, conferences, and frequent travel. There is little opportunity to think long-term—strategically—about big issues such as social mobility, equality, and equity or the critical role public universities have played historically in building an American nation significantly free of the class and caste burdens of European predecessors. Again, the failure to join the debate about inequality speaks volumes.

Is it then surprising that in the absence of our own solutions so much serious discussion focuses on business-model remedies for academic failures? No one ought to be shocked that more and more individuals with governmental or private sector pedigrees are appointed as our presidents because the academy is no longer providing credible leadership.

Not only are academic leaders not discussing big issues, there has also been inadequate attention to local or national cultures and structures in which such conversations can occur naturally. Old and worn conflict models govern academic culture between administration and faculty and within these groups. The adage still holds true that small stakes—crumbs—intensify conflict in local settings with little energy or desire left for confronting significant national issues and trends. Nonetheless, the National Center has long championed collegial discourse between management and labor about the critical issues that confront us. Its Advisory Board, comprising equal numbers of national union leaders and high-ranking academic administrators, has evolved into a model of constructive analysis and open dialogue about tomorrow's and today's grand issues. The Center's annual National Conference and publications reflect the work of the Advisory Board. What the Center has not yet been able to do, except in rare cases, is to transfer this model to campuses where leaders there begin to confront more than provincial matters. Academe's current culture of conflict and myopic focus are structurally reinforced by multiple organizations, on both sides, that fail to provide a common space from which a unified voice about major issues can emerge.

Two of the three historic academic major unions are stepchildren of organizations dominated by educators at the K-12 level where resources and advocacy for higher education are slim by comparison with what is allocated to their dominant constituencies. The third national union has been rent with internal ideological conflict and additionally by divisions between its collective bargaining "congress" and its traditional membership mostly centered in private

colleges. The water is further muddied by the arrival of non-traditional unions—with their own agendas to grow their memberships in new arenas—that are organizing, mostly successfully, contingent and graduate academic workers long neglected by the traditional unions. Relations between these newcomers and the traditional unions is strained which further complicates the emergence of a shared program and a unified narrative.

Unionized academic workers now approach 433,000 (Berry & Savarese, 2012) which places this cohort nationally into the top ranks of organized labor and the only sector where there is strong growth in union membership. But unlike other union vertical constituencies that make their voices heard locally and nationally, academic workers have virtually no political presence at all.

This overall fragmentation is further affected by the Balkanization of management/administration associations into multiple state and national organizations from which emerge multiple and often rival voices about public higher education with no dominant narrative apparent⁴ (Shear, 2014). Unlike the unions, management organizations tend to group around institutional types (public flagships vs. land grant institutions, for example) producing a wide range of views that can confuse decision makers and the public (Stafford, 2014).

Public campuses have—as do their union counterparts—tremendous national political potential. Collectively they constitute a major national industry and deserve a rightful place at the table alongside steel, automobiles, technology, among others. But they have not yet taken that seat.

Academic administrators and union leaders furthermore both face complex constituencies that demand attention, coddling, and, often, unrealistic promises. Union leaders confront the additional burden of periodic elections. But the same could be said of other groups including the astonishingly successful movement for gay marriage, which faced years of struggle until it combined grassroots organizing with clear national narratives that local and national media could no longer ignore. The LGBT movement could provide an important model for public universities were our leaders willing to surrender sovereignties and local loyalties by not pandering to their constituencies and by instead leading with strong, clear, and unified messaging about current conditions in our public universities, colleges, and community colleges and leading with workable plans for returning to their historical, fundamental place in American society. And there is a point of convergence here: LGBT leaders, through trial and error, hit upon a winning

⁴ The multiple and contradictory opinions of college and university leaders about the White House's attempt to "grade" institutions is a case in point.

strategy in *personalizing* the message by having members and sympathizers talk to relatives, co-workers, parents; our students and colleagues could do the same were they similarly provided with coherent talking points about their educational experiences and the resources needed to resuscitate the academy to its essential national role⁵ (Hoffman, 2013).

A Think and Action Tank/Foundation

America's universities, colleges, and community colleges are populated by enormously talented professionals with cutting edge skills in every conceivable academic discipline and craft. These professionals advise governments, help heal civil conflicts, research global warming. In our faculties and staffs are world-renowned graphic artists and advertising specialists. Statisticians, demographers, and economists abound. A strong cohort of individuals is skilled in digital messaging, branding, and communication. What academe has not yet done is recruit these talented individuals to focus some of their efforts on new possibilities for public universities, with the goals of branding—yes branding—public higher education institutions and providing a keen narrative to counter the harmful effects those who already use such skills to devalue our institutions. Branding and narratives are not enough, of course. Non-ideological, calm, step-by-step, data-driven analyses that meet independent scrutiny are needed so that alternative visions can be built for curriculum, pedagogy, outcomes, and funding that frontally challenge the extramural models from Lumina, The Gates Foundation, and the White House (now in a bizarre “grading” of higher education mode). In short, academe must stop being responsive and defensive and must start taking the initiative and leading with academy-generated ideas, models, and long-term visions as well as action plans to participate in media discussions and to develop tools for marketing and advertising campaigns. “Politics” always follow the narratives that seize the public mind (up to now dominated by the opponents of public higher education). And we must use all of the new media and digital venues at our disposal as well as the traditional press to end our silence, to find a new compelling voice.

Saying what needs to be done is easy; doing is quite another matter, especially given the de-centralized, quasi-feudal institutional rivalries and miniscule sovereignties that rule our world. Academic leaders must find appropriate institutional settings where ideas can germinate, be published, marketed, and catch the attention of national media, politicians, and the public.

Although I am sure that it is fanciful overreach to seek the merger the higher education unions and management organizations into an advocacy *foundation or think and action tank*, it is

⁵ “It’s really important that we equip people with the tools they need to communicate and gain acceptance in their families. This is tried and true community organizing – reaching out to people you know and making connections.”

nonetheless inarguable that the absence of a singular institutional voice and narrative harms us terribly. We need go head-to-head with our critics by emulating their data-driven activism and clear pronunciations to secure a seat at the national table.

In short we need to establish an institutional, communicational and strategic twin of the Gates, Lumina, and the other foundations and think tanks that have done so well in occupying the public space from which we have excluded ourselves.

We already have an organization where all of our constituencies do come together, having shed their mutual distrust, to work collectively, collegially, and constructively. The National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in the Academy, now in its forty-first year, is uniquely positioned to begin the work necessary to establish such a foundation, a think and action tank. The Center's [*Journal of Collective Bargaining in the Academy*](#) can be a working model because it is affiliated with the National Center but editorially separate and raises funds independently. I don't minimize the herculean efforts that the founding of such an enterprise would take. But we have no choice: This must be done.

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